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ABSTRACT

The organization and curriculum of the French graduate business schools, the 16 regional Ecoles Superieures de Commerce et d'Administration des Entreprises, has much to offer for pedagogical development in United States business administration education. The schools parallel the university system but provide a more narrowly focused, practically-oriented educational experience. Like American state institutions, the regional schools are competitive, tax-supported, and concerned with accountability. Curriculum consists of four components, including: required courses, electives, internships, and projects. Students may remain generalists or specialize. The language department is well integrated into the institutions' academic structure, with the full-time English professors, all fluent in French, working closely with colleagues on all four components of the curriculum. Several characteristics of one English program have value for U.S. business schools: English is cross-cultural and integrative, commercially-oriented, immediately motivating and reinforcing; productive and goal-oriented, subject to rigid outcomes assessment; and multi-dimensional. Five areas in which this school model could be a stimulus for U.S. schools include the following: materials and course organization; student initiative and motivation; interdepartmental cooperation; assessment of oral mastery; and cooperation with area business and industry. (MSE)

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THE FRENCH GRADUATE BUSINESS SCHOOL:
A MODEL FOR INSTRUCTION IN THE AMERICAN CLASSROOM

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The French Graduate Business School: A Model for Instruction in the American Classroom

A superficial examination of the sixteen regional Ecoles Supérieures de Commerce et d'Administration des entreprises (ESCAE) reveals little common ground between the so-called French Graduate Business School and the American undergraduate college or university. Indeed, the ESCAE seem to resemble our graduate and professional schools more than our standard four year undergraduate colleges and universities because they have especially rigorous and highly competitive entrance examinations and are three year institutions. Considered as a latter-day extension of les Grandes Ecoles, instituted by Napoléon I early in the nineteenth century, French business schools are in a sort of parallel with the French university system, but provide a more narrowly-focused and practically-oriented educational experience to their students. Admission to an ESCAE is very competitive and possession of le baccalauréat alone is not sufficient for entry. Bacheliers must complete at least a year (and very often two years) of classes préparatoires and pass a difficult Concours national to be considered candidates for admission to an ESCAE.[1] Successful candidates may apply to more than one institution and must undergo a rigorous personal interview (entretien) in each institution they may wish to attend. In 1987, for example, there were 2,500 applicants for le Concours national d'entrée. The ESCAE in which I taught English from January to June 1988, called Sup de Co Clermont, judged only 740 of the 2,500 young people admissibles after evaluating the results of the test according to its

own scoring threshold. Of these 740, in turn, only 80 were finally admitted in September 1987 as the class (promotion or promo) of 1990.[2] In 1988, these figures doubled, according to information we received at a faculty meeting, and Sup de Co Clermont was making plans to increase the size of its next promo to 120 students.

While those of us engaged in undergraduate education may at first find little to relate to in the above description, a more careful look at the regional ESCAE will reveal a very different--and far more familiar--picture. Unlike the state run French universities, the fate of each ESCAE is inextricably linked to the geographical area in which it is located and to the students who are enrolled in it. The status of Sup de Co Clermont provides an excellent example here. Approximately one third of the normal operating budget of the school comes from tuition payments, (about 12,000 francs a year for each student), another third from la Chambre Régionale de Commerce et d'Industrie d'Auvergne, which is the legal owner of the school, and the final third from the school's share of la taxe d'apprentissage levied on all companies in France for graduate business education.[3] The school is therefore thrust into a set of dynamics which is certainly familiar to all private colleges and universities in the United States and to most public institutions as well, and which may be summarized by the terms publicity, performance and cooperation. Like Sup de Co Clermont, each ESCAE is constantly engaged in a high-profile publicity campaign for two reasons: First, while there is no dearth of applicants, each school must vie with all the others in the system for the candidates who score the highest on le Concours national, and each school raises the bar every year to weed out the less desirable applicants. Secondly, while French companies must pay la taxe d'apprentissage, they may designate the institution which will receive their contribution and so they

must be courted in various ways by each ESCAE. In addition to generating a great deal of publicity, each institution must demonstrate a high level of performance to attract the best students and to encourage support from businesses in its area. One way to prove itself is by the quality of its graduates (whose lucrative and prestigious entry-level positions are touted in a variety of ways), and by its willingness to serve the business community on which it depends by assuring a regular program of continuing education (formation continue),[4] by offering student expertise for solving company problems, and by hosting regular seminars and colloquia on a wide range of business topics. Finally, cooperation between the Graduate Business Schools and regional companies is sophisticated and reciprocal. Each ESCAE relies on surrounding companies for placement of student stagiaires, and for the constant stream of experts invited to lecture on specialized topics or to teach as part-time instructors or vacataires. Like our own institutions of higher learning, then, the ESCAE must be responsive and responsible to the region upon which it is highly dependent as well as to its immediate clientele--the students it accepts in each promotion.

The curriculum of the ESCAE is a function of the dynamics just described, but it reflects internal academic concerns too, such as the need for a general as well as a specialized commercial formation, the importance of interpersonal relationships and an overriding concern for experience and expertise in the international sphere, including a concomitant linguistic development. At Sup de Co Clermont, there are four principal components of the curriculum: les cours, les électifs, les stages, les ateliers et les projets.[5] Les cours form part of a series of general requirements taught in all three years and grouped under the heading tronc commun. Requirements here include Gestion, Affaires internationales, Langues (with primary emphasis given to English and German),

Marketing, Sciences sociales, and Environnement de l'entreprise. First and Second Year students take courses in Informatique, and Second and Third Year students must take Politique générale de l'entreprise.

Les électifs make up the second component of the Sup de Co Clermont program. As their name suggests, les électifs provide not only a certain freedom of choice, but also a way of introducing personalization and flexibility into the cursus or curriculum. In general, elective courses complement, amplify or diversify offerings in le tronc commun and may include Communication et Publicité, Distribution, Techniques de l'export, Gestion de trésorerie, Sociologie du travail, Langage programmation, Comptabilité, Droit, and un projet personnel, developed at each student's initiative.

Obligatory company internships or stages are the third component of the curriculum at Sup de Co Clermont, and they are strategically placed across the three year program. The first of these, le stage social, takes place in the summer following the First Year of studies and must last at least two months. Students work in various departments of a French company and learn its operation thoroughly. They may engage in marketing research, publicity, or in-house compilation of data, and they must write a comprehensive exit report which they discuss during a seminar attended by both school authorities and company personnel. The second internship, a six to eight week stage linguistique, must be undertaken in a foreign country, most commonly England or Germany, but increasingly in the United States, thanks to contacts developed by Sup de Co Clermont with several American universities.[6] This internship is obviously more challenging than the first, because students must work in a foreign language and in a foreign culture. The third internship is le stage d'étude and it is an integral part of the Third (and final) Year of studies. Carried out for ten weeks in a large French company such as Rhône

Poulenc, it is the most demanding because students are called upon to use their initiative and imagination more fully than in the earlier stage social. Le stage d'étude very often paves the way for an entry-level position with the host company. Students normally complete this stage during the fall of their Third Year and then return to campus in early January to complete their studies and graduate in June. Stagiaires are expected to write a detailed report on their work experience and to defend it before a jury made up of a major professor and outside professionals.

The fourth and final component of the Sup de Co curriculum consists of a choice of ateliers and projets in which Third Year students explore a business topic thoroughly or solve a real problem at the request of a local company or organization. Students must organize their time and resources well and will confer with experts who guide their work and evaluate it.

Students at Sup de Co Clermont may remain generalists or they may choose to group their cours, électifs, stages, projets and ateliers into an identifiable major or dominante. Seven dominantes are possible: Marketing et Gestion commerciale, Affaires internationales, Création et Direction d'entreprise, Finances-Contrôles de gestion, Gestion du personnel et Audit social, Informatique de gestion, and preparation for le Diplôme des études commerciales supérieures (DECS). Those who successfully complete a dominante are awarded an attestation de dominante along with their diploma.

Since space does not permit an extensive analysis of the interactive nature of the Sup de Co Clermont curriculum as a whole, and since we as language teachers are primarily interested in the relationship of language instruction in the school to our own efforts to teach business French, I would like to list and discuss several characteristics of the English program at Sup de Co Clermont which I feel have value for us.

1. English instruction is cross-cultural and integrative. Considered even quantitatively, English has a central role in the curriculum, because it is part of le tronc commun in all but the first semester of the Third Year (when students leave the campus to do their stage d'étude.) English courses at all levels are one hour in length and meet once a week for about fourteen weeks each semester. With the exception of the first semester of the Third Year, all students take two courses (two hours) each week. While First Year students must follov a set curriculum, Second and Third Year course offerings are in the form of modules which also meet one hour per week, and students choose two modules in any given semester. Enrollment in English courses at any level ranges from fifteen to tventy students. At all levels, the Language Department depends heavily on part-time instructors (vacataires) to aid the three professeurs permanents. Students do not purchase textbooks for their English courses. Printed materials are prepared and distributed by the instructors.

The Language Department is well-integrated into the academic structure of Sup de Co Clermont and the three full-time English professors, all fluent in French, work closely with colleagues in other departments on the design and implementation of ateliers, stages and projets d'environnement. Les projets d'environnement are an especially good example of the cross-curricular and integrative nature of English instruction in the school. In order to more fully understand the relationship of business to society at large, students must undertake a five-semester analysis of the business climate which begins with courses in Economics, Sociology and Legal Theory in the First Year and progresses to a series of carefully controlled yet highly individualized projects in the Second and Third Years. As part of their final comprehensive

examination or examen de sortie students must pass an oral épreuve d'environnement at the end of the Third Year. Second and Third Year students choose topics which interest them and the professor monitoring the project divides the promo into groups of eight to ten students according to topic choices. Each group is then divided into subgroups and specific research tasks are assigned. Oral and written reports and interviews with experts in the community are completed according to a rigid schedule. Student representatives from each group meet in rotation with an English professor, who leads discussion in English on the research being done on each topic. Students write their final report in French, of course, but they must also provide an English abstract of their work. English professors are members of the juries for both the French-language and English-language segments of les épreuves d'environnement.

Because of this carefully designed interface between the Language Department and the business departments, students come to understand quickly that English language instruction at Sup de Co Clermont is a vital part of the curriculum and that it is neither a veneer nor a meaningless requirement which can be easily avoided.

2. English language instruction is commercially-oriented. Beginning in the First Year, students are required to read and analyze primary source English texts from newspapers and magazines on a variety of business-related topics (the Japanese economy, women in the American work force, the stock exchange, etc.). Several articles on the same topic are distributed in a given class and students are directed to read them for the next class. When students meet again the following week, they are divided into small groups and each group must analyze and report on an assigned article. Discussion and synthesis by all students then follow

group reports. Students may not always be totally fluent or completely comfortable with the vocabulary and thought content of their article(s), but they gain facility as the year progresses.

Second and Third Year modules are topically oriented and students may choose those which interest them most (subject to space limitations in the courses). Second Year offerings include Bid for Power, a thirteen-week video series having a soap opera format and focusing on the development of projects in a mythical third world country called Tanaku, American Civilization, analysis of the International Herald-Tribune, and English Conversation. Examples of Third Year modules are Video News (analysis and discussion of British and American television programs), commercial French to English Translation (in preparation for the British Chamber of Commerce Examinations), Business Case Studies, and courses on Economics and Marketing.

In all English courses, the instructor's role is primarily to guide discussion, to provide new vocabulary and cultural insights, and to aid in the synthesis of ideas. Students are regularly called upon to serve as animateurs or animatrices in their courses and they generally make conscientious efforts to stimulate discussion and lead their peers.

3. English language instruction is immediately motivating and reinforcing. While it is true that many French children begin learning English at age eleven, and while successful candidates for admission to Sup de Co Clermont have passed a difficult oral entrance examination in the language, it is not true that all First Year students in the program speak fluent English or understand rapid speech and sophisticated but common spoken nuances and idioms. First Year English instruction is thus designed to encourage thinking as well as speaking in English and we have

already discussed the role of daily class activity in this regard. It should be added that First Year students are also given the opportunity to analyze audio and video programs in English. In addition to work done in the classroom, Sup de Co Clermont has exchange programs with cooperating British and German commercial schools which enable First Year students to welcome their foreign counterparts to Clermont for a month long visit and intensive (French) language program in January. The foreign students then return to Clermont the following January to begin a semester of study at the school. French students have the opportunity to spend the second semester of their Second Year studying in a cooperating British or German institution and about one third of the promo avails itself of this opportunity.

4. English language instruction is productive and goal-oriented. As an extension of what has been said above, students are highly motivated to progress in English so that they can successfully complete the required stage linguistique. Many also want to take the written British Chamber of Commerce Exams in the spring of the Third Year. Moreover, Sup de Co Clermont has exchange programs with several American universities which permit especially ambitious students to spend a year and two summers earning an American MBA after their Second Year in Clermont, and then to return to France to complete their final year of schooling.[7] Many students also want to work after graduation for companies which do business in English speaking countries and, of course, the prospects of Europe 1992 loom large in the plans of still others.

5. English language instruction is subject to rigid outcomes assessment. In addition to written work in English courses, mastery of oral English is assessed in a variety of ways at Sup de Co Clermont. We have already

discussed the English orals of le Concours d'entrée, the English language phase of les projets d'environnement, and le stage linguistique following the Second Year. First Year students must take several small group oral exams (on designated topics) called tutorials and each Third Year student sits for a formal examen de sortie before a jury of two English speaking persons as a prerequisite for graduation. The entire program is thus designed to improve skills mastery in a progressive manner and students cannot advance or graduate unless their command of oral and written English improves demonstrably.[8]

6. English language instruction is multi-dimensional. Sup de Co Clermont has bistandard and tristandard video cassette recorders, audio cassette players, a language lab, a recording studio, and a vide selection of British and American audio and video cassettes which are used on a regular basis, as I have described above. Students must eventually master at least a portion of this body of audiovisual material or they cannot succeed in their English courses.

In my opinion, the value of the characteristics just described does not lie on the level of technique alone, but more importantly in an outlook or optic which is worthy of our analysis. While it is true that Europeans are both psychologically and culturally motivated to learn foreign languages from an early age, and while the French Graduate Business School is in many ways a unique institution fulfilling a specific educational need, we as foreign language educators should not be deterred from seeing certain worthwhile messages in the ESCAE system and from asking ourselves hov successful approaches to business foreign language education in that system can be adopted--and adapted--for use in our own institutions. While there are many obvious strong points in the ESCAE organization and curriculum, I would like

to briefly discuss five areas in which the ESCAE model could have a positive influence:

1. Course Materials and Course Organization. Primary sources in the form of newspaper and magazine articles and audio and video cassettes could be incorporated into our FL course offerings early on so that students are accustomed to using them by the time they reach our commercial courses. The key word here ought to be quality, not quantity. It is better to expose students to this material in small doses at first, than to fail to introduce it at all. Of course, we are then faced with the question of where to obtain suitable primary source documents and cassettes--very often their acquisition will require determination and skill on our part. With regard to course organization, the Second and Third Year modules used at Sup de Co Clermont are interesting because they offer variety and flexibility within the framework of what are essentially one-credit courses. The creation of such courses in our own department might attract students who cannot regularly take three-credit offerings, but who would like to explore certain business French topics in greater depth, and perhaps at their own pace.
2. Student Initiative and Motivation. We should become increasingly interested in techniques which give students the initiative to complete tasks for which they have primary responsibility. For example, multi-disciplinary projets d'environnement could be created and monitored by language faculty in cooperation with colleagues in other departments. Case study analysis could serve as a springboard to creative thinking and increased fluency in French. Additional efforts to find local and even international internships will certainly encourage sophomores or juniors who are becoming restless in the classroom and who are wondering if they

will ever have the opportunity to work in the business field.

3. Interdepartmental Cooperation. Interdisciplinary cooperation seems to be a most important key to success at Sup de Co Clermont. We cannot underestimate this dimension of business French instruction and should renew our efforts to create imaginative and productive links with other colleagues. It seems to me that les projets d'environnement are an excellent way to begin this cooperation.

4. Assessment of Oral Mastery. In France, students who cannot master oral English cannot complete a graduate business education. Faced with this stark reality, we simply need to intensify our efforts to increase the speaking ability of our own students so that they will have an equivalent mastery of French. In addition to the regular use of primary source audiovisuals, we may want to consider linking course grades to improvement in oral command (and therefore to lab work beyond class time) and to consider developing oral examinations of various types in all our French courses.

5. Cooperation with Area Business and Industry. Stereotyping and negativism in our attitudes toward the business community must be overcome and more imaginative links created. We might begin by asking what we have to offer companies in exchange for their cooperation. Perhaps our department could agree to do a certain amount of translation work at a minimum charge in exchange for student internship placement. Perhaps we could agree to provide low cost foreign language instruction to company personnel in exchange for equipment grants or for seminars by company experts. We might even give special academic credit to students who participate in highly productive internships which really benefit companies willing to accept interns.

The organization and curriculum of the French Graduate Business School can certainly stimulate the imagination and offer guidelines for pedagogical development here in the United States. I came away from my teaching experience in France with a renewed sense of purpose and a desire to implement in all my French courses the best of what I had seen at Sup de Co Clermont, because the philosophy of education I experienced there was consistent and successful.

Notes

[1]Depending on the type of baccalauréat they hold, students may choose one of four tracks (filières) of le Concours national: Bacheliers C (Mathematics and Physics) take filière G; Bacheliers C compete with bacheliers D (Natural Sciences) in filière G^1. Filière E groups bacheliers B (Economics) and A (Literature), and filière T is open to bacheliers G (technical Studies) and H (Computer Science). Of the one hundred one openings in the class (promo) entering Sup de Co Clermont in fall 1988, forty were to be taken from filière G, thirty-six from filière G^1, twenty-two from filière E and only three from filière T. Baccalauréat C is thus the surest route to a French Graduate Business School because it best prepares candidates for les prépas and for the G^1 examination, with its heavy emphasis on math and science. A few candidates are also accepted at Sup de Co Clermont directly from the university system through a process called admission parallèle. Candidates must have completed the two-year premier cycle of university studies and have received le Diplôme d'études universitaires générales (D.E.U.G.) in order to apply for admission parallèle. Please see the brochure published by Sup de Co Clermont (janvier 1988), which contains much of the information included here.

[2]Montpezat, Robert, "Le Plein d'énergies," Développements du Groupe ESC Clermont, 5 (septembre 1987), 1.

[3]Mary, Michel, "Totalement Partenaires," Développements du Groupe ESC Clermont, 2 (janvier 1987), 1.

[4]In point of fact, la formation continue is an important source of income for schools in the ESCAE system. Instruction is arranged by contract with

local companies and the schools actively seek such contracts. At Sup de Co Clermont, one professor is in charge of overseeing and expanding the entire continuing education program. Profits realized by the school after teachers in the programs are paid become part of the institutional operating budget.

[5]All information on the Sup de Co Clermont curriculum is based on the author's own experience and recollections as well as on promotional brochures published in 1986, 1987, 1988, and 1989 by Sup de Co Clermont.

[6]American universities having student exchange agreements with Sup de Co Clermont are Rutgers, Cornell University, the University of Kansas, the University of Oregon at Eugene, Georgia Tech and the University of Louisiana at Baton Rouge.

[7]In 1989, this special exchange MBA program existed between Sup de Co Clermont and Cornell University, Louisiana State University at Bâton Rouge, the University of Oregon at Eugene, the University of Kansas, and Georgia Tech in Atlanta. French students receive scholarship aid from le Conseil régional d'Auvergne for study in the United States and tuition fees are waived by participating American universities, which then have the right to send business students to Sup de Co Clermont.

[8]Students are required to maintain a minimum grade of seven over twenty in all subjects at the end of each of the three years. Those who fall below this minimum in English after the First Year are advised to undertake summer study in England and most do this. Students who score below seven in two academic subjects (including English) must repeat the entire year.

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